



SUSTAINABLE WATERSHEDS OFFICE

Annual Report 2002



Introduction

The Sustainable Watersheds Office has three main objectives:

- 1) Assist communities in planning for growth to minimize impacts to the environment and community character;
- 2) Coordinate the Rhode Island Watershed Partnership; and
- 3) Promote the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of Rhode Island's natural and recreational resources

1. PLANNING FOR GROWTH:

The Office assists communities plan for sustainable development that minimizes negative impacts to the environment and preserves community character and meaningful open space. This also involves assisting the Governor's Growth Planning Council develop policies to encourage growth that is both economically and environmentally sound.

2. The RHODE ISLAND WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP (RIWP):

The Rhode Island Watershed Partnership involves organizations cooperating to preserve, protect, and restore the State's environment (or natural resources) on a watershed basis. DEM's Sustainable Watershed Office coordinates activities in the Northern and South County watersheds, assisting to prepare and implement watershed action plans.

3. PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF NATURAL AND RECREATIONAL RESOURCES:

The Office is assisting communities identify and protect their important natural, cultural and recreational resources. This also involves promoting sustainable natural resource based business's to reduce fragmentation of forestland.



Protection and restoration of natural and recreational resources

Strategies to maintain undeveloped land while enhancing natural resource values.

Alternative Forest Business Challenge Grant

The Department has received funding from the USDA Forest Service to distribute grants to forest landowners interested in starting small businesses capable of producing specialty crops that are grown and harvested in forests.

Although generating income from traditional forest management can be difficult in Rhode Island, there are a variety of alternatives, such as edible and medicinal plants, decorative products, and recreation, that provide business opportunities.

These grants will facilitate the startup of resource based businesses that fit in with community character and the generate revenue to reduce the likelihood the land will have to be sold. The grants, which will range from \$500 to \$1000 per project, will pay part of the cost for supplies and materials needed to initiate forest based businesses.

Citizens Guide to the Farm, Forest and Open Space Act

Rhode Island General Law (44-27) allows property enrolled in the Farm, Forest, and Open Space Program to be assessed at its current use, not its value for development. The purpose of the law is not to reduce property taxes, but to conserve Rhode Island's productive agricultural and forestland by reducing the chance it will have to be sold for development.

A guidebook to describe the rules and regulations was last developed in 1980 when the program was established. The Office worked with the Rural Lands Coalition and Conservation Districts to revise the Citizens Guide, incorporating recent changes in the laws and regulations governing this program, as well as to create an informative, easy to read reference.

Riparian Buffers Brochure

The Riparian Buffers and Healthy Watersheds brochure was revised and re-printed. This full color brochure touts the benefits of riparian buffers and calls attention to the vital role forests play in protecting water quality.

South County Greenspace Project

The South County Greenspace Project assisted nine South County communities in identifying and mapping their important natural, cultural, and recreational resources. These areas were linked throughout each town and across the region. The purpose is to help towns determine the special features that are most important to protect either through land acquisition or the use of creative land use techniques. As South County is developed these special places, that represent its unique character and quality of life, can be protected.

Each participating town received greenspace maps illustrating their natural, cultural, and recreational resources as well as the communities' protection priorities. In addition, a Greenspace Protection Strategy, which unites the diverse goals of local, state, and federal interests, has been drafted and will be made available on-line. The Strategy includes specific recommendations for the communities to begin implementing the plans.

As a result of this project, twelve applications from South County communities were submitted in the most recent round of RIDEM Open Space grants, six of which were successful, resulting in \$1.98 million to preserve nearly 495 acres in the region.

Woonasquatucket Greenspace Project

The successful South County Greenspace Project is being replicated in the Woonasquatucket River Watershed. In addition to demonstrating what special features need to be protected, this project will also develop specific strategies for restoration.



Planning for Growth

Creative land use tools and techniques to assist communities in preserving and enhancing their environment and quality of life.

Urban Environmental Design Manual

The Sustainable Watersheds Office initiated the development of an Urban Environmental Design Manual. The project will promote environmentally responsible urban revitalization and infill development by providing a comprehensive guide for local officials, community groups, residents, and the development community. The Department has completed a contract with a consultant and held the first Advisory Committee meeting in December. The anticipated completion date is in the Fall of 2003.

Conservation Development Manual

The Office is preparing a manual of guidelines to assist communities and developers in understanding and implementing successful conservation development and to minimize impacts to the environment.

To aid communities in adopting the concepts presented in the manual, a companion checklist will organize the ten step design process according to each stage of subdivision review required by Rhode Island law. The checklist will allow reviewing boards to more easily evaluate the sensitivity of various resources and compare design alternatives. A brochure to promote conservation development was created, and a training course was also developed with training sessions held in Scituate, Foster, and Glocester.

Governor's Growth Planning Council

The Department provides staff support for the Governor's Growth Planning Council that Governor Almond charged to provide recommendations to enhance sustainable development in Rhode Island. Sustainable Watersheds staff helped to prepare a report (www.state.ri.us/dem/pubs/index.htm) for the Council to explore the feasibility of community-identified Growth Centers to encourage compact growth. Designated growth centers would receive priority for state discretionary funding sources.

The Governor recently signed Executive Order 02-05 requiring the State Guide Plan to reflect the recommendations of the Growth Centers report. State agencies and departments are required to complete an inventory of funding resources that can be targeted to growth centers, including a description of any changes to rules, regulations, or statutes needed to give such areas elevated priority in these programs.

Sustainable Watersheds staff also drafted a report for the Council's Compact Growth Subcommittee on compact growth and the development of new public water supply systems. Also, staff assisted in the preparation of the 2002 annual report for the Council, available at <http://www.state.ri.us/dem/pubs/index.htm>.

Technical Planning Assistance in South County – Follow Up

In the Summer of 2001, South County municipalities received copies of the award-winning *South County Technical Planning Assistance Guide*, which includes the nationally-recognized *South County Design Manual*. This summer, the same towns received greenspace maps and the results of community "audits" of their comprehensive land use plans conducted by renowned land use planner, Randall Arndt. Together, these products served as the impetus for a recent round of implementation grants offered by Grow Smart Rhode Island and the Doris Duke Foundation to allow communities to adopt some of the creative land use techniques developed under the project.



Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project: Land Use and Zoning Implementation Plan

The Sustainable Watersheds Office received a \$45,000 grant under the Smart Growth: Saving Open Space, Revitalizing Brownfields grant program from the EPA. An RFP was issued in January 2003 for consultant services on the project with the project commencing in Spring 2003. The Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council will be an active participant in the project, as will the City of Providence Department of Planning and Development.



Rhode Island Watershed Partnership

Coordinating existing programs and building new partnerships to more effectively manage Rhode Island's watersheds.

Watershed Action Plans

Watershed Action Plans present a clear picture of the most pressing issues to be addressed within a particular watershed and are developed with input from residents, nonprofits, municipalities, and state and federal agencies. Five watershed action plans were completed for South County and Northern watersheds, and implementation is underway.

- In the Woonasquatucket, over 75% of the listed activities are either in progress or completed.
- In the four South County watersheds, over 79% of the eighty-four identified actions are in progress or completed.

Activities in South County include:

- An action team led by the Wood Pawcatuck Watershed Association with support by RIDEM and Brown University completed and published a report entitled, 'Public Small Craft and Fishing Access Points on the Wood Pawcatuck Rivers.' This major work will help guide riparian protection and restoration in the watershed.
- The Narrow River Stormwater Technical Team has been actively overseeing the design of a stormwater retrofit for the Mettattuxet Beach Outfall - a major pollution source to the river - and, developing a comprehensive stormwater management project that will help implement the Narrow River TMDL and RIPDES Phase II requirements.
- Scientists, resource managers, policymakers and local watershed stakeholders like the Salt Ponds Coalition have been convening several meetings to improve coordination and communication on issues relating to the salt ponds. Water quality and related monitoring strategies have been a major focus of these discussions.

Watershed Action Plans cont'd

- RIDEM SWO continues to work with URI and the Saugatucket River Heritage Corridor Coalition to acquire funding to execute a forest restoration and management plan for one of the last large wooded parcels in the Saugatucket River watershed.

Activities in the Woonasquatucket include:

- A comprehensive inventory of potential riparian buffer restoration sites was conducted along the Woonasquatucket River to examine opportunities for improving water quality and enhancing ecological and social values within the watershed. Efforts are underway to develop funding to support restorations.
- A Woonasquatucket River Watershed greenspace project is being developed that will provide protection strategies for each community as well as identify linkages across municipal boundaries.
- Approximately 250,000 tires were removed from a pile along the banks of the river in Johnston.

A draft action plan for the Blackstone watershed has been completed.

Training & Workshops

For the third year in a row, Sustainable Watersheds staff trained DEM Park Naturalists on how to educate the public about watersheds. In June, 2002, five naturalists were trained to use tools such as the Enviscape Model to teach children what a watershed is, and why they are so important. This year, educational programs were also extended to future environmentalists at Rhode Island College. The Sustainable Watersheds Office also assisted the Rivers Council with a monitoring workshop for Watershed Councils.

Action Teams

There are two types of Action Teams; watershed or project-based and issue-based teams that work on statewide topics. Both bring together the most knowledgeable people, including watershed residents, to solve problems and implement watershed action plan objectives. The current Action Teams in Rhode Island are:

Watershed Action Teams:

- Storm water management – Narrow River
- Habitat Restoration – Woonasquatucket
- Fish Tissue - Woonasquatucket
- Riparian Corridors – Wood/Pawcatuck
- Water Quality Monitoring – Wood/Pawcatuck
- Water Quality Monitoring – Salt Ponds

Statewide Action Teams:

- Stormwater Guidance Manual
- Monitoring Strategy
- Habitat Restoration
- Urban Rivers